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ABSTRACT

A study examined the opinions of high school principals and advisers regarding a free student press and adviser role to determine whether opinions and practices had changed since the Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier decision. A survey was sent to both the newspaper adviser and the principal at 531 schools throughout the United States during the spring semester of 1989, just one year after the court's decision. Responses were received from 220 principals and 360 advisers. Respondents were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the intensity of their agreement or disagreement for statements regarding role of the student newspaper, control by the administration, responsibility of the adviser, controversial issues, First Amendment rights, and the Hazelwood decision. Results revealed significant shifts in intensity in all seven points from the 1985 J. W. Click and L. L. Kopenhaver survey and indicated a more alarming extent of censorship than had been hypothesized. Findings suggest that advisers clearly see their role as requiring review of student copy and correction of factual inaccuracies and misspellings, even if the student cannot be told about them before publication. More research into the increased censorship conditions appears to be called for. (Five tables containing the complete results of replies and intensity measures are included.) (KEH)

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Opinions of Principals and Newspaper Advisers Toward Student Press Freedom and Advisers' Responsibilities Following *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*

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OPINIONS OF PRINCIPALS AND NEWSPAPER ADVISERS TOWARD STUDENT PRESS FREEDOM AND ADVISERS' RESPONSIBILITIES FOLLOWING HAZELWOOD V. KUHLMEIER

Students in public high schools have had the right to freedom of expression for two decades. Before that legal guarantee, many students exercised press freedom either by default or by explicit permission from their school administrations. Philosophically, journalism educators and the literature of publications advising for 40 years or more have defined "adviser" as one who gives advice rather than one who writes, edits or censors. But how do advisers themselves define their role and responsibilities? And do their principals support them or agree with them?

A survey of opinions toward freedom of the high school press in Florida prior to the Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1988 found that both principals and advisers agreed that advisers should read copy prior to publication and correct misspellings that students make in their copy. While they approved of prior review by advisers for some purposes, both groups considered it censorship if done by the administration. Advisers further agreed that most advisers censor student newspapers more than they would like to admit.[1]

In a national survey of high school newspaper advisers and their principals just prior to the Hazelwood decision, the authors found that although most principals believe in the importance of a free student press, they also believe that maintaining discipline in the school, having advisers review all copy before it is printed and prohibiting the publication of

articles administrators deem harmful are more important than an uncensored student press.[2]

In the post-Hazelwood period, a Missouri survey sought principals' reactions to the Supreme Court decision. Although a majority said they did not anticipate any change in what they did, most principals indicated they would censor under some circumstances, most expected the adviser to notify them of anything that might be objectionable and most indicated their newspapers were not an open forum before Hazelwood.[3]

Articles after Hazelwood generally analyzed the role of the principal as a continuum, from acting as publisher and exercising regular prior review to carrying on in the Tinker-era mode.[4] However, no national study had ascertained how principals and advisers view the role of the school newspaper and the responsibilities of the school newspaper adviser.

The Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier decision therefore prompted us to survey principals and advisers nationally to see if opinions and practices had changed following this decision. We planned to gauge differences in opinion about student press freedom between principals and newspaper advisers, but we also found much about how advisers view their responsibilities.

Method

An earlier survey to a random sample of schools throughout the United States had yielded a high number of schools with no school newspaper (26%),[5] so we surveyed one-half of the newspaper members of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association

with a 41-question instrument refined from previous use by Martinson and Kopenhaver in Florida[6] and by Click and Kopenhaver.[7]

The survey was sent to both the newspaper adviser and the principal at 531 schools throughout the United States during the spring semester of 1989, just one year after the Hazelwood decision. Both individuals received identical survey forms. Responses were received from 220 principals (41%) and 360 advisers (68%). These responses represented every state in the United States, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

We asked respondents to indicate the intensity of their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a seven-point scale. In analyzing the seven-point scale, we grouped "strongly agree" and "agree" responses together as overall agreement and "strongly disagree" and "disagree" responses together as overall disagreement, omitting the three central responses of "slightly agree," "neutral" and "slightly disagree" as being too weak to use for interpretation. Complete results of replies to all seven points of intensity on all questions are presented in the tables.

In reporting findings, we have indicated where principals and advisers concurred on the same question and where they differed on the same question. In nearly all of the cases of concurrence, even though both groups agreed or disagreed with the statement, their intensity of agreement or disagreement was significantly different statistically.

Demographics

A majority of the principals responding represented public high schools (89%); the adviser distribution was about the same, with 87% from public institutions. With regard to length of time in the position, 10% of the principals and 7% of the advisers were in their first year in their jobs. One-third of the principals and 30% of the advisers had been in their positions 2 to 4 years. More than half of both groups were in their positions 7 or fewer years (59% of advisers and 57% of principals). Only 5% of principals and 6% of advisers had held their positions more than 20 years.

With regard to size of school, 10% of the principals and 12% of the advisers represented high schools with an enrollment of under 500 students. Schools with 501-1000 students were represented by 24% of the principals and 25% of the advisers; schools with 1001-1500 students, 27% of the principals and 28% of the advisers; schools with 1501-2000 students, 26% of the principals and 22% of the advisers; and schools with more than 2000 students, 14% of both principals and advisers.

With regard to the number of newspapers published each year, nearly half the respondents reported publishing between 7 and 10 issues (41% of principals and 49% of advisers). Two-thirds of the principals (68%) and three-fourths of the advisers (74%) said their schools published 7 or more issues a year. Twenty percent of the principals and 17% of the advisers reported that their schools published 12 or more issues per year.

Findings

Role of the Student Newspaper. Whether students are mature enough to practice journalism did not appear to be a significant problem. Three-fourths of the high school principals and 89% of the newspaper advisers disagreed with the statement that "high school students are too immature to practice responsibly freedom of the press" (Table 1). In another forced-choice question, advisers did not see the school board's interest in a good image as a threat to a free student newspaper. Both groups were divided on the statement that "it is more important to the school board for the school to have a good image than to have an uncensored school newspaper (28% of the principals and 22% of the advisers agreed with the statement; 32% of the principals and 59% of the advisers disagreed with it).

On four statements about the student newspaper, the principals and advisers strongly differed. The forum theory advanced by the Student Press Law Center and other groups suggests that school newspapers should be a forum for expressing student opinion. Two-fifths of the principals (41%) agreed that "the student newspaper is more a learning tool than a vehicle for the expression of student opinion," but a nearly equal percentage of advisers (39%) disagreed with that statement. This was a shift from Click and Kopenhaver's 1985 survey in which three-fifths of the principals (60%) and two-fifths of the advisers (40%) agreed with the same statement.

In public schools where the newspaper is a forum for student opinion, students have a legal right to press freedom. However, two-thirds of the principals (67%) agreed that "student

rights to publish a newspaper must be balanced against the realization that students are not trained journalists." Advisers were divided, one-third (34%) agreeing and one-third (33%) disagreeing.

Nearly one-half of the principals (46%) disagreed that "once students have been trained in press responsibility, they should have control over all editorial content of the student newspaper," while 44% of the advisers agreed with the statement.

Many observers believe that principals exert censorship or ask newspaper advisers to censor for public relations purposes. Principals were divided about whether "guarantees of freedom of expression in the student newspaper outweigh public relations considerations" (28% agreed; 29% disagreed). Two-thirds of the advisers (68%) agreed with the statement and only 9% disagreed with it.

Control by the Administration. Advisers and principals generally concurred with each other on two statements related to administrative interest in control of the school newspaper. Both groups disagreed that "articles critical of the school board should not appear in the student newspaper" (principals 52%; advisers 87%) and both groups disagreed that "school administrators should have some voice in the selection of the student newspaper editor" (principals 53%; advisers 87%)(Table 2). This latter was a change from the 1985 survey in which 55% of the principals said the administration should have a voice in selecting the editor.

Advisers and principals strongly differed with each other on five statements related to administrative control. One-half of

the principals (50%) agreed that "school administrators should have the right to prohibit publication of articles they think harmful, even though such articles might not be legally libelous, obscene or disruptive," while 77% of the advisers disagreed with the statement. On the opposite extreme, only 8% of the advisers agreed and only 19% of the principals disagreed.

Principals were divided about whether "the student newspaper should be allowed to print a story that it can prove is true even if printing the story will hurt the school's reputation" (35% agreed; 30% disagreed). Nearly two-thirds of the advisers (65%) agreed with the statement and only 13% disagreed.

Principals also were divided about whether "it is more important for the school to function smoothly than for the student newspaper to be free from administrative censorship" (35% agreed; 30% disagreed), while 70% of the advisers disagreed.

Forty percent of the principals agreed that "newspaper advisers sometimes fail to see how the paper can disrupt other aspects of the school" while 46% of the advisers disagreed with the statement. Similarly, 43% of the principals agreed that "maintaining discipline in the school is more important than publishing a newspaper free from administrative censorship," while 60% of the advisers disagreed.

These responses suggest that while principals and advisers both believe that the paper should be open to critical, perhaps negative stories and both see little reason for the administration to have some voice in selecting the editor, the two groups disagree about other very basic issues involving press freedom. Principals believe they have a right to prohibit

publication of "harmful" articles, and advisers disagree. Principals are split about whether publication of a true story that will hurt the school's reputation should be allowed, while advisers support publication, and principals are split about whether a smooth-functioning school is more important than a free student newspaper, and again advisers support press freedom.

Principals tend to believe that advisers sometimes do not realize how the paper can disrupt the school and also believe that maintaining discipline is more important than a free student newspaper. Advisers disagree with both positions.

Advisers' Responsibilities. Advisers support both direct and indirect censorship of the newspaper by advisers. Advisers and principals agreed in their responses to six of the seven statements relating to advisers' responsibilities. Both principals (67%) and advisers (57%) agreed that "the adviser should correct factual inaccuracies in student copy before publication even if it is not possible to confer with the students involved" (Table 3). Principals (74%) and advisers (53%) also agreed that "the adviser should correct misspellings that students make in their copy." Teaching and advising protocols generally would support having the teacher/adviser point out the mistake to the student and let the student correct the error before publication.

Less directly, principals (96%) and advisers (82%) agreed that "the student newspaper adviser should review all copy before it is printed." It is possible, but unlikely, to review copy without censoring. Therefore, after the preceding results, the response to the following statement was moot. Principals

(94%) and advisers (61%) agreed that "if an administrator asks the adviser to read copy prior to publication, the adviser should do so."

Somewhat out of character with responses to other questions about advising responsibility, both principals (36%) and advisers (63%) disagreed, to varying degrees, that "if the adviser knows that the newspaper is going to publish something that will put the school in a bad light, the adviser has a professional obligation to see that that particular item is not published."

Further regarding review, 80% of the principals and 53% of the advisers agreed that "newspaper advisers who do not read copy of student newspapers before publication should be held personally responsible for any complaints about the newspaper."

One area where the principals and advisers differed was that "the faculty adviser is ultimately responsible for the content of the student newspaper rather than the student editors." Sixty-three percent of the principals agreed with the statement while advisers were divided, 36% agreeing and 35% disagreeing.

From these results, it appears as if advisers see themselves as the last line of defense for the school and its administration before the newspaper is published; that is, they see themselves as editors who must review copy and correct misspellings and inaccuracies but not necessarily remove entire stories that will hurt the school's reputation.

Controversial Issues. Both principals and advisers agreed that controversial issues belong in the student newspaper and

that the student newspaper should be concerned with issues that relate to the larger community, state or nation. Principals (71%) believed that the adviser is obligated to inform the administration of any controversial stories before the newspaper goes to press," but advisers (40%) disagreed (Table 4).

First Amendment in Society. There was general concurrence on support for First Amendment principles. Principals (51%) and advisers (63%) both agreed that "society has an obligation to protect the First Amendment rights of groups such as the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan" and that "society has an obligation to protect the First Amendment rights of high school students" (principals 62%; advisers 81%) (Table 4).

Hazelwood Decision. Although 89% of the principals and 98% of the newspaper advisers said they were familiar with the Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier decision, their responses to seven statements about it suggested considerable misunderstanding.

More than one-half of the advisers (52%) agreed that "if the newspaper is a public forum for student expression, defined as open to news, editorials and other opinion pieces, then it may not be censored," but 58% of the principals disagreed (Table 5).

More than one-half of the principals (52%) disagreed that "if student editors in written policy or practice have been granted final authority over the newspaper's content, they still have the right to that free expression after the Hazelwood decision." Advisers were divided in their responses, 43% agreeing and 38% disagreeing.

More than one-half of the principals (53%) disagreed that "if student editors have clearly been given final authority over

content decisions, or if the school has specifically designated the student publication as a forum, the Hazelwood decision does not apply and school officials will still be very limited in exercising censorship." Advisers were divided, 37% agreeing and 37% disagreeing.

Three-fourths of the principals (77%) and 56% of the advisers disagreed that "if school officials do not exercise prior review over the content of the newspaper, they are not legally liable for its content." About the same number, 77% of the principals and 63% of the advisers, disagreed that "if the adviser does not exercise prior review over the content of the newspaper, he or she is not legally liable for its content."

A plurality of principals (49%) and advisers (42%) disagreed that "a written editorial policy giving student editors final determination of the content of the newspaper has no effect following Hazelwood." But 27% of the principals and 30% of the advisers agreed with the statement.

More encouraging, 58% of the principals and 75% of the advisers disagreed that "the Hazelwood decision says that school officials must control the content of the student newspaper." Only 20% of the principals and 11% of the advisers agreed.

Conclusion

Although private schools have not been guaranteed freedom of the student press, nearly 90% of all schools are public and journalism educators have long emphasized to their students that "adviser" means one who gives advice and not one who writes, edits, censors or otherwise produces the student newspaper.

Advisers always have been in the middle between the students and the administration, often a difficult position. Some advisers who have sought recognition for excellence in their publications have literally become the editors of those publications. Some have sought to avoid controversy and negative publicity by exercising some of the prerogatives of editors, thus becoming censors.

This survey of newspaper members of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association, however, has indicated a more alarming extent of censorship than has been hypothesized. Advisers clearly see their role as requiring review of student copy and correction of factual inaccuracies and misspellings, even if the student cannot be told about them before publication. One wonders how responsibility and ethical behavior can be developed in students if their advisers are correcting their stories.

From the first survey in Florida in 1982 through two national surveys, the results suggest that further surveys should be conducted to determine whether conditions are improving or deteriorating. As researchers, academics must report findings dispassionately. As journalists, academics must be interested in the practice of press freedom where it is guaranteed by law, the Constitution and its Bill of Rights. The obvious censorship evident in these studies demonstrates that this is an area that deserves much more research attention than it has been receiving.

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Endnotes

[1] Lillian Lodge Kopenhaver and David Martinson, "South Florida Advisers', Administrators' Attitudes Are Recorded in Controversial Issues Surveys," Columbia Scholastic Press Advisers Association Bulletin, 40:2 (Fall 1982), pp. 9-15.

[2] J. William Click and Lillian Lodge Kopenhaver, "Principals Favor Discipline More Than a Free Student Press," Journalism Educator, 43:2 (Summer 1988), pp. 48-51.

[3] Thomas V. Dickson, "Attitudes of High School Principals About Press Freedom After Hazelwood," Journalism Quarterly, 66:1 (Spring 1989), pp. 169-173.

[4] Robert P. Knight, "High School Journalism in the Post-Hazelwood Era," Journalism Educator, 43:2 (Summer 1988), pp. 42-47.

[5] Click and Kopenhaver, op. cit., p. 48 (58 of 222).

[6] Kopenhaver and Martinson, op. cit.; questionnaire obtained from authors.

[7] Click and Kopenhaver, op. cit., questionnaire obtained from authors.

TABLE 1
Responses to Statements Regarding Role of the Student Newspaper, in Percent

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Neutral	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strong Concurrence between Advisers and Principals								
High school students are too immature to practice responsibly freedom of the press.	Prin.	2	4	8	4	8	32	42
	Adv.	1	3	3	3	2	19	70***
General Concurrence between Advisers and Principals								
It is more important to the school board for the school to have a good image than to have an uncensored student newspaper.	Prin.	10	18	13	13	14	20	12
	Adv.	11	11	5	10	6	20	37***
Strong Difference between Advisers and Principals								
The student newspaper is more a learning tool than a vehicle for the expression of student opinion.	Prin.	15	26	18	17	13	10	1
	Adv.	5	15	15	13	12	29	10***
Student rights to publish a newspaper must be balanced against the realization that students are not trained journalists.	Prin.	23	44	15	4	5	6	2
	Adv.	11	23	17	5	10	17	16***
Once students have been trained in press responsibility, they should have control over all editorial content of the student newspaper.	Prin.	7	18	12	3	15	24	22
	Adv.	17	27	14	4	13	10	5***
Guarantees of freedom of expression in the student newspaper outweigh public relations considerations.	Prin.	6	22	19	8	17	19	10
	Adv.	42	26	11	7	5	6	3***

***$p < .001$.

TABLE 2
Responses to Statements Regarding Control by the Administration, in Percent

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Neutral	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
General Concurrence between Advisers and Principals								
Articles critical of the school board should not appear in the student newspaper.	Prin.	5	10	12	8	13	38	14
	Adv.	X	1	2	5	4	23	64***
School administrators should have some voice in the selection of the student newspaper editor.	Prin.	5	10	10	13	10	33	20
	Adv.	1	3	2	4	3	14	73***
Strong Difference between Advisers and Principals								
School administrators should have the right to prohibit publication of articles they think harmful, even though such articles might not be legally libelous, obscene or disruptive.	Prin.	20	30	15	8	8	13	6
	Adv.	2	6	6	3	6	22	55***
The student newspaper should be allowed to print a story that it can prove is true even if printing the story will hurt the school's reputation.	Prin.	9	26	16	7	11	16	14
	Adv.	33	32	11	8	3	8	5***
It is more important for the school to function smoothly than for the student newspaper to be free from administrative censorship.	Prin.	15	20	16	7	12	19	11
	Adv.	2	5	6	6	11	30	40***
Newspaper advisers sometimes fail to see how the paper can disrupt other aspects of the school.	Prin.	8	32	22	4	10	17	8
	Adv.	3	12	20	11	8	28	18***
Maintaining discipline in the school is more important than publishing a newspaper free from administrative censorship.	Prin.	16	27	18	9	9	16	5
	Adv.	4	6	8	11	12	28	32***

X = less than .5%.

***$p < .001$.

TABLE 3
Responses to Statements Regarding the Responsibility of the Adviser, in Percent

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Slighly Agree	Neutral	Slighly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strong Concurrence between Advisers and Principals								
The student newspaper adviser should review all copy before it is printed.	Prin.	77	19	2	1	0	0	X
	Adv.	59	23	7	3	4	2	3***
The adviser should correct factual inaccuracies in student copy before publication even if it is not possible to confer with the students involved.	Prin.	33	34	11	5	5	8	4
	Adv.	29	28	16	7	3	8	9*
General Concurrence between Advisers and Principals								
Newspaper advisers who do not read copy of student newspapers before publication should be held personally responsible for any complaints about the newspaper.	Prin.	41	39	9	4	2	4	2
	Adv.	29	24	15	6	4	12	10***
The adviser should correct misspellings that students make in their copy.	Prin.	48	26	11	5	3	6	1
	Adv.	32	21	17	6	4	8	12***
If an administrator asks the adviser to read copy prior to publication, the adviser should do so.	Prin.	71	23	5	X	0	X	X
	Adv.	36	25	11	9	2	6	11***
If the adviser knows that the newspaper is going to publish something that will put the school in a bad light, the adviser has a professional obligation to see that that particular item is not published.	Prin.	8	8	19	7	21	28	8
	Adv.	3	3	6	6	8	26	47***
Strong Difference between Advisers and Principals								
The faculty adviser is ultimately responsible for the content of the student newspaper rather than the student editors.	Prin.	39	24	15	4	5	11	2
	Adv.	17	19	13	4	11	15	20***

X = less than .5%.

***$p < .001$. *$p < .05$.

TABLE 4
Responses to Statements Regarding Controversial Issues and First Amendment Rights, in Percent

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Neutral	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES								
Strong Concurrence between Advisers and Principals								
Controversial issues have no place in a student newspaper.	Prin.	1	1	1	1	12	35	49
	Adv.	0	1	X	X	3	9	87***
The student newspaper should concern itself only with issues that relate to the school, not those of the larger community, state or nation.	Prin.	1	4	3	1	10	35	46
	Adv.	X	1	X	0	3	20	75***
Strong Difference between Advisers and Principals								
The adviser is obligated to inform the administration of any controversial stories before the newspaper goes to press.	Prin.	40	31	15	4	5	5	X
	Adv.	11	16	17	8	8	18	22***
FIRST AMENDMENT IN SOCIETY								
Strong Concurrence between Advisers and Principals								
Society has an obligation to protect the First Amendment rights of groups such as the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan.	Prin.	16	35	15	14	4	7	8
	Adv.	35	28	12	10	4	4	6***
General Concurrence between Advisers and Principals								
Society has an obligation to protect the First Amendment rights of high school students.	Prin.	21	41	19	6	6	3	2
	Adv.	57	24	11	3	1	3	1***

X = less than .5%.

***$p < .001$.

TABLE 5
Responses to Statements about the Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier Decision, in Percent

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Neutral	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Strong Concurrence between Advisers and Principals								
The Hazelwood decision says that school officials must control the content of the student newspaper.	Prin.	8	12	7	2	13	29	29
	Adv.	2	9	4	4	6	21	54***
If school officials do not exercise prior review over the content of the newspaper, they are not legally liable for its content.	Prin.	2	6	3	4	10	39	38
	Adv.	9	11	2	12	10	27	29***
If the adviser does not exercise prior review over the content of the newspaper, he or she is not legally liable for its content.	Prin.	2	5	2	4	10	38	39
	Adv.	6	9	3	8	10	27	36*
A written editorial policy giving student editors final determination of the content of the newspaper has no effect following Hazelwood.	Prin.	10	17	8	10	7	29	20
	Adv.	15	15	9	11	8	21	21
Strong Difference between Advisers and Principals								
If the newspaper is a public forum for student expression, defined as open to news, editorials and other opinion pieces, then it may not be censored.	Prin.	7	11	5	4	16	34	24
	Adv.	31	21	7	5	8	18	11***
If student editors in written policy or practice have been granted final authority over the newspaper's content, they still have the right to that free expression after the Hazelwood decision.	Prin.	10	13	8	6	12	31	21
	Adv.	22	21	7	6	7	20	18***
If student editors have clearly been given final authority over content decisions, or if the school has specifically designated the student publication as a forum, the Hazelwood decision does not apply and school officials will still be very limited in exercising censorship.	Prin.	7	11	6	10	13	33	20
	Adv.	18	19	8	10	8	22	15***

***$p < .001$. *$p < .05$.

Responses to these statements about the *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* decision are from the 89% of the principals and 98% of the advisers who said they were familiar with the decision.